137. Social change

Social change is a broad term referring to shifts in any number of areas of social life. It includes "the transformation of culture and social institutions over time, as reflected in the living patterns of individuals" (Bankston 2000, 539). These changes may occur at the micro level, when small and uncoordinated shifts in behavior occur among individuals (Weinstein 2010), or at the macro level, as with large-scale industrialization or globalization (Sekulic 2010), or even at the meso level in terms of how groups and organizations form, operate, and disband. The broader shifts in social institutions, social organization, social relations, and/or culture that social change represents may occur incrementally or in rapid, "revolutionary" shifts. Political change is a more specific phenomenon, referring to changes in governmental and political structures and/or relations (e.g., shifts in balances of power) and can include material changes or changes in political culture and identities (Kurian 2011). While often related, it is possible to discuss social and political change separately or to examine their relationship to one another.

Social and political change are usually complex, occurring at a variety of paces, in a variety of ways, and through multiple processes. Evolutionary perspectives on social change view it as gradual and organic; revolutionary perspectives view change as resulting from specific causal factors such as revolutions (Bankston 2000). In truth, both types of change play a role, as, for example, when purposeful action at the individual level creates larger change or as disruptive events create changing conditions to which individuals must respond (Weinstein 2010). Likewise, differences exist in whether scholars see cultural or ideational changes versus material changes occurring first or being most important (Harper and Leicht 2019). We do not attempt to adjudicate these disagreements in this entry but rather discuss a range of factors that likely shape both material relations and culture, beginning with a discussion of factors that may lead to change but where change is collateral as opposed to intentional, and ending with more intentional efforts.

Social and political change often occurs as a by-product, or collaterally, as a result of other changes. Factors that many people think of immediately as contributing to such social and political change are economic and/or technological developments (e.g., changes in the modes of production for Marxist accounts of change). For instance, industrialization led to significant economic and political change, leading Durkheim to reflect on the nature of solidarity in society. The Great Depression in the US and the Great Recession, which rocked much of the world in the early twenty-first century, brought about significant changes in major markets and indelibly impacted the lives of many. Substantial changes in important industries, such as the rise of agri-business (Lobao and Meyer 2001), can lead to social and political changes too as communities that historically revolved around prior modes of organization experience substantial shifts. More local economic shifts can also be impactful (Summers and Branch 1984).

Major technological innovations can be used in ways that also facilitate social and political change. It is easy to point to the invention of the printing press or the rise of radio, television, the phone, or the Internet, as important moments that allowed new and unexpected social and political changes to occur. Of course, these technologies do not directly cause social or political change themselves, but their usage may. Moreover, resulting changes are not necessarily uniformly positive. For instance, the widescale private purchase and installation of convenience surveillance technologies (e.g., smart devices and cameras) has the potential to fundamentally shift the meaning and experience of privacy.

Economic and/or technological catalysts for change may also kick off legal change processes. As initially acknowledged by Weber, legal systems have a complex and dynamic relationship to large social and economic systems. Whether shifts are in broad legal environments (e.g., the globalization of law, see Halliday and Osinsky 2006), or particularly impactful legal developments (e.g., in the US, the extension of personhood to corporations), legal changes both represent real instances of political change and also can have broad and sometimes unpredicted collateral consequences of their own.

Other commonly thought of sources of social and political change, which are particularly evident to those living through COVID-19, are disease, disaster, and environment change. COVID-19 has brought

significant changes in everything from fertility rates, mortality rates, and shifts in life expectancies to changing everyday behaviors and shifts in migration and travel. The same could be said, though, about prior pandemics dating back to at least the middle ages. For instance, labor markets were also tight following the Black Death, which led to improved bargaining power of laborers but also legal changes designed to re-establish advantages of economic elites that were being lost (Chambliss 1964).

Likewise, disasters can have major local impacts (Arcaya, Raker, and Waters 2020) and lead to larger shifts, especially when tied to larger environmental shifts such as climate change (Dietz, Shwom, and Whitley 2020). In fact, there is a very real potential for climate-related changes to be particularly significant, including forcing mass migrations away from uninhabitable areas and instigating political conflicts related to migration but also likely to other shortages. Whether change results from shifts in social and political life due to trying to limit climate disaster or to our collective failure to do so and the environmental impacts climate change brings, it is likely that climate change will reshape the world over the next century.

This suggests two other common collateral sources of change: demographic shifts and human migration patterns, which themselves result from complex drivers. For instance, some have argued that youth bulges catalyze political revolutions (Goldstone 1991), but demographic change can also result in broad cultural and policy changes that are more incremental but still substantial (e.g., culture and policy has changed as a result of the baby boomer generation in the US, Easterlin 1987). Internal migration can lead to major political and social change, as it did in the US when Black Americans engaged in substantial internal out-migration from the South in the mid-twentieth century (McAdam 1982). International migration can also lead to substantial change, both in the origin countries, but also in receiving countries (e.g., migration to Europe by Syrian, Libyans, and Ukrainians).

All of the above sources of change can occur without there being intention to create change. But there are a host of other causes of change that are intentional. Indeed, political systems in many countries are designed to be responsive to (or repressive of) efforts to generate political and/or social change. For example, the enfranchisement of new populations (e.g., women, people of color) has occurred through intentional struggle, as has the adoption of government policies to mitigate climate change (Dietz, Shwom, and Whitley 2020).

Intentional change is not limited to the domestic affairs of a nation. In an increasingly globalized world, international political cooperation, pressure, and instruments such as treaties can bring about global shifts, as has been the case with the adoption of international human rights treaties and norms (Cardenas 2004). The sociological explanations of this tend to focus on the role of norms, but other perspectives that take a more rational approach discuss the importance of free trade and globalization that allows states to put pressure on one another as well as the role power plays between countries considered stronger or weaker (Cardenas 2004).

War, violent conflict, and revolutions have very clear objectives involving change, but the results are not always as intended. For example, in their review of the social impact of war, Modell and Haggerty (1991) explain how war can change societal perspectives on categories such as ethnicity and gender. They think that war has the power to reshape and rework social categories within a society, which has both social and political implications. Revolutions can be both political and social, and what begins as a political revolution can be transformed into a social revolution, but it is not always the case that it will (Kniss and Burns 2004). It is important to note that revolutionary situations do not necessarily always lead to a full-scale revolution (Kniss and Burns 2004). Historically, the Great Revolutions, including the French and Russian Revolutions, led to significant change in political and social institutions (Goldstone 1982), but many other revolutions have failed to create substantial change or have created very uneven change (see Robinson and Merrow 2020, for instance, for a discussion of changes brought by the Arab Spring).

Social movements represent another intentional force for change, and they may create change locally, regionally, nationally, or even spanning across nations. While there is academic debate over how to measure and allocate responsibility for change to social movements, their aspiration to create change is clear. Political changes due to movements

may include affecting the political agenda, inciting legislative headings and/or bills, the passage of new legislation, and/or new judicial decisions. Cultural consequences are also possible, whether these involve changes to opinions, the creation of new cultural products or new meanings for existing items, or new communities and/or subcultures.

Religious movements also often work to intentionally create change, whether social, political, or both. This can be seen very clearly in the US with the rise of the religious right and what many consider the "culture wars" over the fight for abortion rights and LGBTQ+ rights in particular. According to Wuthnow (1983), the countercultural left and the new religious movements it supported opened the door for the religious right. Relatedly, the pro-life movement started as a majority-Catholic movement (Luker 1984) and then grew with the rise of the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition, which were powerful right-wing movements that have drawn power from white Southern conservative evangelicals (Guth et al. 1994).

In closing, social and political change is complex and often involves multiple processes, including intentional efforts for change and unintentional collateral consequences of changes in other areas (e.g., technological or demographic shifts). While it is tempting to focus exclusively on the role of intentional efforts for change, demographic shifts, disasters, and disease, among others, can also play major and sometimes interacting roles.

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